



SURVIVE AND CONQUER

Beating cancer is just the first step to getting back to normal, **Peta Rasdien** reports

They've done the hard yards and won — chemotherapy, radiotherapy, maybe even surgery. Survivor 1 — Cancer 0. But what next? Crushing fatigue, aches and psychological scars are still burdens cancer survivors have to bear but too often when the all-clear comes, they are expected to be back to normal straight away.

Now a pilot program offered jointly by the University of Notre Dame Australia and HBF is helping breast and prostate cancer survivors transition back to good health.

Combining group exercise and counselling, the program seeks to address survivors' physical debilitation as well as their emotional trauma.

This year the 10-week program will guide 50 breast and 50 prostate cancer survivors through cardio and strength training three times a week and counselling once a week.

Clinical Exercise Physiologist Fiona Naumann, who brought the program to Australia after witnessing the results of a similar program in the United States, said it was common for cancer survivors to suffer an emotional hangover when they were in remission.

This could include fears of recurrence and anxiety about the future, feelings about loss of control, and lack of support beyond the initial treatment.

"You have your last test and there's no cancer there and you're expected to be instantly back to

normal but you're just not," she said. "Cancer survivors live in fear that every niggles means it is going to come back."

Helping survivors through the long-term social, physical and emotional impacts has become an important new focus, according to Dr Naumann.

"In a way this program addresses that 'Now what?' and it gives cancer survivors a sense of control back," she said.

"Cancer is something you just cannot control and you do question why you got it but if you can give people ownership of their body back . . . they can move forward in the most positive way they can."

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Dr Naumann said participants felt more comfortable exercising with people who understood what they had survived.

“When you go to a regular gym they just don’t understand what you have been through,” she said.

“It just helps having others alongside them that have been through the same thing.”

Many participants reassessed what was important in their lives and made significant lifestyle changes.

HBF managing director Rob Bransby said during the past decade HBF had noted a trend that over half of its members undergoing cancer treatment continued to have regular hospital admissions during the following year, with only 25 per cent

of the claims cost being for direct cancer treatment.

“During 2002-03 we estimate that claims by members receiving cancer treatment exceeded \$40 million, with a further \$60 million spent over the next five years on those same people as they continued to have complex hospital procedures,” Mr Bransby said.

“Clearly the impact of cancer on health and quality of life can last longer than the actual disease.”

Dr Naumann said the program had delivered remarkable improvement in the quality of life for participants.

“We are seeing a really big shift in reduction of fatigue levels and when we stratified the components last

year it was the counselling group who had the greatest reduction in fatigue which highlighted how important the mind is for fatigue,” she said.

“If you can’t get your head right the body just can’t be right. I think if you take the time to resolve emotional issues then it doesn’t sit in that sub-layer and eat away at you.

“Counselling can come with stigma and some participants have been doubtful about whether they need it but at the end all have said they have benefitted from it.”

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Survivor: Clementina Pruiti in the therapy pool with others from her cancer survivors exercise group.

Picture: Michael O'Brien



PILOT FOR SURVIVORS

Clementina Pruiti lost her sister to breast cancer in 1995. Thirteen years later she found herself battling the same demon.

Nearly a year of treatment left the now 69-year-old tired, aching and wondering if she'd ever return to her old life. "By the end of the radiotherapy I was a mess, I was so tired, I couldn't do very much, I could barely look after myself," she said.

A regime of tablets, part of the treatment to stave off the cancer, badly affected her joints. "My ankles were sore, I couldn't get down and I couldn't get up. My knees were sore and my back was sore," she said.

"I kept going back to the doctor thinking: 'My God what's going to happen to me'. I used to look at people in wheelchairs and think I'd end up (like that) and I was terrified."

But a recommendation from a friend that she join the Notre Dame and HBF cancer survivors pilot project helped her get back on track. She's now back doing her housework and can drive once again.

"I feel terrific. It has been a wonderful program for me," she said. "It's good to be able to hear other people's experiences and the people that guided us through it are wonderful, they do it in a very gentle manner and you are never pushed."

Before being diagnosed with prostate cancer in September 2008 botanist Paul Armstrong, 60, would walk 10 to 20km a day.

But during treatment he became a couch potato, piling on 10kg that he's now working hard to lose through the exercise component of the program.

Through a series of cardio and strength training exercises he has lost 4kg and put on muscle.

He said facing his own mortality was probably the biggest emotional hurdle. "Up to this stage I'd had a few health scares along the way but nothing life threatening so all of a sudden you realise we don't live forever, so it is a bit scary in that respect," he said.

The counselling had helped him deal with this and other issues. "It's nice to be able to talk to other people who are in the same boat as yourself. (So you're) not feeling totally alone," he said.